

ELIJAH AND ELISHA: PART I

MOSES AND JOSHUA

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Four hundred years after the time of Moses, Elijah the Tishbite (mid-ninth-century BCE) serves as the greatest religious leader and prophet of his generation, often patterning his acts on the deeds of Moses. Moses had mentored Joshua, who then succeeded him. Joshua replicated some of Moses' miracles. Elijah mentors Elisha ben Shaphat, who then succeeds him. Elisha in turn replicates some of the acts of Elijah, and by extension, some of the acts of Moses and Joshua.

ELIJAH AND MOSES

Although Elijah in the overall scheme of things is less significant than Moses, the relevant narratives in the Book of Kings reflect events in the life of the earlier leader.¹

"The cumulative impact of these extensive Mosaic allusions is to present Elijah as a Moses *redivivus*. Both appear at crucial moments in the religious and political history of the people. Through Moses, [God] rescued the Israelites from Egyptian oppression and formed [them] as his people; through Elijah, [God] preserves the faithful members of his people amid paganism and persecution. Both are significant figures in the history of prophetism as well. [The] long line of [God's] intermediaries in Israel [began with Moses]; in Elijah that line produces its quintessential hero."²

Elijah, as Moses, is an important leader in his day. Each is a powerful figure, commanding respect from his peers. Each hears directly from God. Each spends significant time in the wilderness. Each has a distinctive appearance (Ex. 34:29-35; II Kgs. 1:8).

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There are many other parallels between Elijah and Moses.

- Elijah treks forty days and forty nights to reach Mount Horeb [Sinai];³ Moses is atop Sinai for forty days and forty nights (I Kgs. 19:8; Ex. 24:18).
- Elijah survives on very limited rations in his escape to Horeb; Moses eats neither bread nor water on Sinai (I Kgs. 19:8; Ex. 34:28).
- Elijah rests in a cave on Horeb; Moses stands in a cleft on Mount Sinai (I Kgs 19:9 ff.; Ex. 33:22-23).
- At Horeb/Sinai each stands in the presence of God and receives a theophany (ibid).⁴
- At Horeb/Sinai "Elijah covers his own face with his mantle much as [God] places a hand over the cleft of rock so that Moses cannot see the divine face" (Ex. 33:21-23).⁵

Each prophet:

- confronts the ruler of his day (Elijah with Ahab, as earlier, Moses with Pharaoh) and demands – and *provokes* – the desired changes in the monarch's behavior (I Kgs. 18:19-20, 41-45 and 21:20-29; Ex. 7-12).
- asks the populace to decide between loyalty to him or to another group (the prophets of Baal, I Kgs. 18:21; the challenge from Korah, Dathan and Abiram, Num. 16).
- sets up an altar with twelve stones, corresponding to the twelve tribes (I Kgs. 18:31; Ex. 24:4)
- is informed as to the identity of his successor (I Kgs. 19:16; Num. 27:18, Deut. 31:7-8).
- is asked to appoint his successor publicly.⁶

In the lives of both Elijah and Moses, God manifests the divine presence and power through a judicious use of fire. The burning bush, Mount Sinai revelation (Ex. 19:18) and dedication of the Tabernacle (Lev. 9:24) all had the divine presence represented by fire. Elijah invokes God's fire during the contest with the prophets of Baal atop Mount Carmel (I Kgs. 18:38). Here the fire comes and consumes the offerings set up by Elijah. It serves as miraculous proof of God's presence in the world.

Sudden fire is also at the center of events when King Ahaziah sends two military delegations to capture Elijah. There, at Elijah's behest, fire consumes these warriors. The destruction of the troops by fire (II Kgs. 1:10-12) echoes the incineration of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu, where divine fire likewise consumes them (Lev. 10:2).

In *Pesikta Rabbati*, the editor of that Midrash collection lists many similarities between Moses and Elijah, often ingeniously citing biblical verses to support these connections.⁷

JOSHUA AND MOSES

Joshua not only follows Moses as leader of the Israelites, he consciously repeats events in Moses' life. Just as Moses sent scouts to seek out the land, so Joshua sends scouts to reconnoiter Jericho (Num. 13, Josh. 2). Just as the waters of the Sea of Reeds split to allow the Israelites to cross through in safety, so a similar event takes place with Joshua at the Jordan (Ex. 14:21-30; Josh. 3:7-13; 4:23).

Joshua, like Moses before him, needs to adjudicate between the territorial wishes of the various tribes (Josh. 17:14-18; Num. 32).

When the Israelites cross over the Jordan, they place twelve memorial stones to acknowledge this event. Joshua chapter 4 "preserves two traditions about memorial stones set up to commemorate the crossing of the Jordan by the Israelites. One describes the memorial stones set up at Gilgal (4:1-3, 6-7, 8b, 20); the other describes the stones set up in the bed of the river (4:4-5, 8a, 9, 15-19)."⁸ This parallels the twelve pillars which were set up at the base of Mount Sinai, one each for the twelve tribes (Ex. 24:4).

Prior to a significant event, the giving of the Decalogue in Exodus (Moses), and the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua (Joshua), each leader informs the people that they are to prepare themselves for this great occasion. In Exodus, there is a three-day time lag from the command to prepare and the great event; in Joshua it is the next day, but the announcement is made after the people have been at the Jordan's edge for three days (Ex. 19:10-15; Josh. 3:1-5).

"[A close reading of the text] reveals that the biblical narrative portrays Joshua as more than just a successor to Moses. Numerous passages seem consciously to portray him as [a counterpart] of Moses . . . The Lord assures

Joshua that the divine presence will accompany him as it did Moses (Josh. 1:5, 3:7; cf. 4:14). The crossing of the Jordan, led by Joshua, is described as analogous to the crossing of the Red Sea (Josh. 4:23). Joshua's encounter with the commander of the army of [God] (Josh. 5:13-5) exhibits a striking resemblance to Moses' encounter with the angel of [God] at the burning bush (Ex. 3:2-5). Joshua exercises the authority to reinterpret or even suspend divine commands spoken to Moses (Josh. 6:17; 8:27) . . . Joshua 12 juxtaposes a summary of Joshua's military feats (12:7-24) to those of Moses (12:1-6). Joshua's assignment of the inheritances for nine and one-half tribes [west] of the Jordan is paralleled to the similar work by Moses for the Transjordanian tribes (Josh. 13:8-33 = 14:1-19:51). Joshua's function as covenant mediator in Joshua 24 resembles that of Moses at Sinai (Ex. 20-24). The note of Joshua's death (Josh. 24:29) assigns to him the epithet 'servant of [God],' which was frequently used of Moses (e.g. Josh. 1:1; 8:31)."⁹ The Midrash also connects deeds of Joshua and Moses.¹⁰

ELIJAH AND ELISHA

Elijah not only appointed Elisha ben Shaphat as his successor, but for about five or six years (or longer) he was Elisha's mentor.¹¹ Elisha repeats many of Elijah's acts. As Elijah on his southward journey had struck the Jordan River with his cloak in order for the waters to split to allow dry passage for himself and Elisha, so following Elijah's ascent to heaven, Elisha takes that selfsame mantle which Elijah had left behind, and divides the Jordan on his return journey to the north (II Kgs. 2:13-14).¹²

Elisha duplicates some of the miracles of his mentor. He does this to honor Elijah's memory, to claim his own power, and to be seen by others as a prophet of God. "It is often observed that several deeds told of Elisha – the multiplication of oil ([II Kgs. 4] vv. 4-5) and bread (vv. 43-44), and the revival of the woman's son (vv. 33-35) – have their counterpart in the Elijah cycle of stories; cf. I Kgs. 17:14-16, 17:20-22)."¹³ Radak, on II Kings 2:14, notes that Elisha performs sixteen miracles in comparison to the eight performed by Elijah (cf. II Kgs. 2:9-10).

Some of Elisha's deeds have a Moses-like quality. After assuming his new role, he sweetens the waters at Jericho, an act reminiscent of Moses at Marah (II Kgs. 2:19-22; Ex. 15:23-25).¹⁴ Elisha's prescription for healing the

tzara'at of the Aramean general Naaman echoes Moses' request for Miriam's healing in the Book of Numbers (II Kgs. 5; Num. 12). His feeding of the hungry villagers (I Kgs. 4) is in the tradition of Moses with the Israelites in the desert (Ex. 16, Num. 11 – quail and manna). Further, Elisha delegates some of his authority to others, as did Moses (II Kgs. 9:1-3; Ex. 18:24-26, 24:14).

As fire, horses, and chariots are part of Moses' life (Ex. 3, 14, 15), so there are several incidents in the life of Elisha where these elements play a role. Not the least of them tells how, at the time of Elijah's ascension, Elisha sees *a fiery chariot with fiery horses*. Later, Elisha's life is saved when *the hills all around Elisha [were] covered with horses and chariots of fire* (II Kgs. 2:11; 6:17).

That Elisha chooses to repeat some of the miracles of Elijah, his direct mentor, echoes similar parallel patterning by Joshua in terms of Moses, as noted earlier. Perhaps Elisha thinks of himself in part as a latter-day Joshua. When they cross the Jordan, Elijah asks Elisha what final act he can perform for his disciple. Elisha asks for a double portion of Elijah's "spirit." The word used here for spirit [*ru'ah*] is the same word God uses to describe Joshua to Moses ("*Single out Joshua . . . an inspired man*" – *ish asher ru'ah bo*, Num. 27:18) and which describes Joshua following Moses' death (*filled with the spirit* – *malei ru'ah*, Deut. 34:9). I Kings 19 closes on the note that Elisha became Elijah's attendant, using the same verbal root (*sh-r-t*) as the one describing Joshua's relationship to Moses (I Kgs. 19:21; Ex. 24:13; 33:11; Num. 11:28).

II Kings 2 situates Elijah and Elisha at Gilgal. Gilgal is likewise the site of Joshua's initial encampment once the Israelites crossed the River Jordan (Josh. 4-5). "Gilgal's association with the Joshua traditions establishes the analogy between the relationship of Elijah and Elisha and that of Moses and Joshua."¹⁵

A good leader sets a personal example and serves as a model for appropriate behavior. Elijah served as a guide for Elisha ben Shaphat, just as Moses had been the mentor of Joshua ben Nun. Some of this mentoring/example-setting was direct, and in other cases the disciple was aware of his exemplar's fame and sought to adopt similar behavior. The mid-ninth-century prophets Elijah and Elisha were aware of the acts of Moses, even though that leader

had lived hundreds of years before them. In different ways, they sought to emulate Moses. Each of these biblical leaders – Elijah and Elisha, and Joshua in his time – performs acts unique to his own life situation, yet they display an awareness of past precedents. They follow and honor those who preceded them.

NOTES

1. Mordechai Cogan, *I Kings* (AB 10; New York: Doubleday, 2000) pp. 456-457; Jerome T. Walsh, "Elijah," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992, S.) 2.464.
2. Walsh, "Elijah," 2.464.
3. Horeb is "the name for Mt. Sinai used by the E[lohim] and D[euteronomy] writers of the Pentateuch, probably stemming from different tribal traditions": Nancy L. Lapp, "Horeb," in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) p. 404.
4. "Among the prominent themes of I Kings 19 is . . . [that] the narrator has creatively used motifs associated with Moses, enriching his tale with literary allusions that, at times, attain verbal resemblances to the earlier tradition" on Mt Sinai/Horeb (Cogan, *I Kings*) p. 456. For other literary allusions see Jerome T. Walsh, *I Kings, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1996) pp. 284-9.
5. Marvin A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007) p. 232.
6. Further, each has an assistant with them at significant moments (I Kgs. 18:43, 19:3; Ex. 24:13), a meal on a mountain involving the prophet and other significant figure(s) (I Kgs. 18:41-42; Ex. 24:9-11): *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary*, vol. 3, ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999) p. 137. Both Elijah and Moses need to flee for their lives, because the ruler wants to kill them, and each flees to the desert (I Kgs. 19:2-4; Ex. 2:15).
7. *Pesikta Rabbati* (Discourses for Feasts, Fasts and Special Sabbaths), trans. William G. Braude. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968), *Piska* 4:2; cf. Exodus Rabbah 44:1; Numbers Rabbah 18:12 (connections between Moses and Elijah, and also Moses, Elijah, and Micaiah); Lamentations Rabbah 1:2.23.
8. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible [NRSV]* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), note to Joshua 4:1-5:1.
9. George W. Ramsey, "Joshua," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992, S.) 3:1000.
10. William G. Braude, *The Midrash on Psalms [Midrash Tehillim]* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), Psalm 19:8; TB *Bava Batra* 75a; *Ta'anit* 20a; *Numbers Rabbah* 12:9; *Midrash Tanhuma, Exodus and Leviticus*, vol. 2, S. Buber Recension, trans. John T. Townsend (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), 6:10, Exodus 23:20ff., Part I.
11. Elisha is commissioned at the end of I Kings 19. Chapter 20 (the Israel-Aram war) takes place sometime afterward (v. 1); and chapter 22 explains that three more years have passed. In that chapter Ahaziah, Ahab's son, rules for two years (I Kgs. 22:1, 52). II Kings, chapter 1, gives further details about Ahaziah's death, and chapter 2 describes Elijah's ascent to heaven.

12. "Moses, under God, founded the covenant people. Both Elijah and Elisha were his successors in that their work was to ensure the continuance of that people in their own time. So both prophets divided the waters of Jordan as Moses had done at the [Reed] Sea": *The Second Book of Kings, The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible*, commentary by J. Robinson (Cambridge, London: Cambridge University Press, 1976) pp. 23-24.

13. Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; New York: Doubleday, 1988) p. 59. See Cogan, *I Kings*, p. 432. In the Christian Scriptures, some of Jesus' miracles suggest that Elijah and Elisha served as his exemplars/mentors. Jesus resurrects the son of the widow of Nain (Luke 7:11-17; cf. I Kgs. 17:17-24; II Kgs. 4:32-37). Jesus specifically mentions Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (Luke 4:26). As Elijah and Elisha miraculously fed widows, so does Jesus miraculously feed people (I Kgs. 17:13-16, II Kgs. 4:1-7; Matthew 14:16-21, 15:32-38).

14. "An unmistakable literary affinity exists between the tale of Moses and that of Elisha," including repetition of key terms: Cogan and Tadmor, *II Kings*, p. 37, n. 2.

15. Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 272.